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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to isolate new trends and options in grading, 150 four-year colleges and universities were surveyed. Of these, 102 offered pass/fail or a similar grading option, 30 had no grading option, 6 indicated that a system was under serious consideration and 12 failed to respond. The two major reasons for haveing a pass/fail system were: (1) to encourage students to explore subjects outside their major without fear of jeopardizing their grade point average, and (2) to minimize the fear of failing. The great majority of schools used A, B, C, and D as equivalent to "pass." The most common practice was to allow students to enroll in one course per term under pass/fail, though 10 institutions indicated no limit. Most institutions indicated some form of limitation on those wishing to enroll under the option. The methods of registering for the various options varied, with some institutions allowing the students to declare the option up to the "normal deadline for adds and drops" and others requiring that it be declared at registration. In most instances, consent was required for enrollment in a grading option. Twenty-two of the respondents indicated that the instructors were denied knowledge of pass/fail enrollments, and thus reported standard grades that were converted by the Registrar, while in 80 cases, the instructors were aware of those enrolled under the option. (AF)

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PASS-FAIL GRADING: WHAT ARE THE TRENDS?

Presented to

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGIATE REGISTRARS
AND ADMISSIONS OFFICERS

Fifty-Sixth Annual Meeting
April 23, 1970

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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The use of academic marks to admit students to college and to estimate their success has been an integral part of American higher education since the founding of Harvard University in 1636. Historically, colleges and universities have experimented with numerical grading scales but since the early 1900's most institutions have settled on the "A", "B", "C", "D", "F" grading system. The importance of grades can be determined by reviewing typical college and university policies on such matters as academic probation, entrance requirements, eligibility for financial aid, honor societies, graduate and professional schools, and employment recommendations.

But do letter grades deserve such emphasis? Research studies over the years have consistently cited inadequacies of traditional grading. Starch and Elliot,[1] Rugg,[2] Spence,[3] Lampson,[4] Hoyt,[5] and Marshall,[6] are but a few that have been critical of letter grading, but their studies have resulted in few substantial changes. On the other hand, the pass/fail concept, while only recently institutionalized, appears as a promising alternative to traditional grading.

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Pass/fail grading is designed to reduce academic pressures and competition while encouraging students to explore coursework outside the major without fear of jeopardizing their grade point average. In essence, the option should stimulate scholars toward learning rather than testing. Schools such as Princeton, Reed, and Sarah Lawrence have used the pass/fail concept for many years. Moreover, isolated instances of pass and fail, or satisfactory and unsatisfactory, have appeared in grading systems in higher education for nearly one hundred twenty years. Smallwood reports that:

> . . . while the other colleges invented and reinvented scales using numbers, Michigan did away with the conventional marking system. It is well to realize that here is the first evidence that the accepted method of evaluating students was perhaps not the most desirable. In 1851 the students at Michigan either did or did not pass their work.[7]

A Survey On Grading Innovations

In an attempt to isolate new trends and options in grading, 150 four year colleges and universities were surveyed by this writer. The initial survey was sent to major universities in each state as well as institutions that were rumored to be experimenting with pass/fail or other grading innovations. Background information on institutions was collected through private correspondence, personal interviews with colleagues, and information gleaned from catalogs and related literature. Of the 150 institutions surveyed, the response was overwhelming: 102 (68%) offer pass/fail or a similar grading option, 30 (20%) have no grading option, 6 (4%) indicate that a system is under serious consideration, and 12 (8%) failed to respond.

The fact that 68 per cent reported some variety of grading innovation seems significant even when considering sample bias. While a purely random sample would likely reduce this percentage, these results are significant in terms of the acceptance of the pass/fail concept.

Variations in grading options are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

GRADING OPTIONS:
SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Nomenclature	Number	Percent
Pass/Fail	56	54.9
Pass/No Pass	15	14.7
Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory	10	9.8
Credit/No Credit	6	5.9
Honors, Pass/Fail	2	1.9
Pass, D or F	2	1.9
Other	11[a]	10.8

[a]Includes options (one each) of; Distinction, High Pass, Pass, and No Credit; Honors, High Pass, Pass, and F; High Pass, Pass, and Fail; Honors, Pass, and No credit; Pass, No Credit; Pass, No Report; A, B, C, and No credit; Credit, F; Credit, Withdrawal; Pass, Unsatisfactory; and Satisfactory, E.

The Philosophy of Pass-Fail

The purpose or rationale of a specific grading innovation is of utmost importance to those contemplating a change in grading systems. Strangely, many institutions fail to outline a philosophical basis for their grading innovations (or perhaps, for the sake of brevity it was omitted). In this study, 35 (34.3%) of those responding indicated that their grading option was adopted to "encourage students to explore subjects outside their major without fear of jeopardizing the grade point average". "To minimize the fear of failing" was the rationale listed by 7 (6.9%). An additional 7 (6.9%) indicated the option was to "facilitate intellectual exploration and broaden the student's education". Five (4.9%) noted as their reason, to counteract some of the undesirable effects of the current grading system", while the remaining institutions listed their reasons as noted in Table 2.

Table 2

GRADING INNOVATIONS: PURPOSE AND RATIONALE
SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Purpose or Rationale[a]	Cases[b]	Percent
Encourage students to explore outside their major without fear of lowering the GPA.	35	34.3
Reduce anxieties stemming from competition for grades.	13	12.7
Facilitate intellectual exploration and broaden the students' education.	7	6.9
Minimize fear of failing.	7	6.9
To counteract some of the undesirable effects of grading.	5	4.9
Freedom, flexibility and experimentation.	1	.9
Develop a more personal attitude toward study.	1	.9
Help students experience the joy of learning for its own sake.	1	.9
Offered as an enrichment program.	1	.9
To provide an opportunity, without grade point consideration, for students to assess their own interests and abilities.	1	.9
Encourage greater communication between students and faculty as to the meaning of evaluation.	1	.9
To build a pluralistic approach to grading.	1	.9
Aid the disadvantaged student to meet demands of courses where performance often depends on a student's having been exposed in an informal way to the kinds of subject matter which make up the background against which such a course is taught.	1	.9
Encourage students to use it, not to escape requirements, but as a means of satisfying off-beat interests.	1	.9
Provide a better intellectual environment by placing the initiative for learning with the student.	1	.9
Emphasize individual guidance through detailed evaluation of the students' work, rather than rank ordering of students.	1	.9
No purpose listed	28	27.5

[a]Each purpose listed is a composite of all those with similar intent. Thus, the "generalized" wording is that of the author, and may not fit any one institution.

[b]n=102; Response exceeds sample size because some institutions listed more than one statement of purpose.

Although practices differ by institution, and often within a single institution, 63 (61.8%) of those with grading options make it available to all undergraduates. Nineteen (18.6%) limit the option to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, 18 (17.6%) allow only juniors and seniors to utilize the option, and 2 (1.9%) limit the option to freshman only.

The Grade Point Average and Failing Grades

Several authors note that with pass/fail, it is common practice to combine the usual "D" and "F" levels of performance under the "F" category. While this practice does occur (notably at Brown, Michigan State, Princeton, Purdue, and several of the California universities), this survey indicates that of the 102 respondents, only 15 (14.7%) limit the passing grade to the A-B-C category. Thus, 87 (85.3%) use a somewhat standardized approach with A-B-C and D equivalent to "Pass", and "F" equivalent to failure, no credit, or no pass.

Hewitt,[8] in a study of 22 colleges and universities with pass/fail options, found that a failing grade affects the grade point average. Of the respondents in this study, 56 (54.9%) reported that a failing grade does not affect the grade point average.

Credit Allowable

Allowing students to enroll in one course per term under pass/fail (62.7%) is by far the most usual practice in the institutions surveyed. Ten (9.8%) institutions indicate no limit and 7 (6.9%) allow 2 courses per term.

Maximum credit allowable differs among institutions. Fourteen institutions (13.7%) allow a maximum of 8 courses (one per semester)

while 14 (13.7%) allow a total of 4 courses, 7 (6.9%) permit 12 courses (one per quarter), and 7 (6.9%) allow a total of 6 courses over the four year period. Variations are summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

PASS/FAIL CREDITS ALLOWABLE BY TERM
SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Credits Per Term	Cases	Credits Per Term	Cases
One Course	64	Six Credits	1
No Limit	10	Varies by College	1
Two Courses	7	Varies by Class	1
All (Total on P/F)	8	One-Half Course	1
One Course Per Year	3	No information	6

Table 4

MAXIMUM PASS/FAIL CREDITS ALLOWABLE:
SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Total	Cases (%)	Total	Cases (%)
Eight Courses	14 (13.7)	Twenty-four Credits	5 (4.9)
Four Courses	14 (13.7)	All Coursework	5 (4.9)
Twelve Courses	7 (6.9)	Fifteen Credits	4 (3.9)
Six Courses	7 (6.9)	No Limit	3 (2.9)
Twelve Credits	7 (6.9)	Other[a]	20 (19.6)
Eighteen Credits	6 (5.9)	No Information	10 (9.8)

[a]For additional breakdown, see Appendix A.

Limitations of the Option

Most responses included some form of limitation on those wishing to enroll under the option. Thirty-one (28.7%) stated that students must be in good academic standing (presumably at least a 2.0 on the 4.0 scale).

Twenty-seven institutions (25%) limited the use of the option to electives only, 10 (9.3%) allowed only courses outside the major, while 9 (8.3%) require the student to carry a full load of regularly graded courses before enrolling in a pass/fail course. In many cases, the various colleges or departments within the institution are allowed to designate whether their courses will be allowed under the option. Frequencies of the various limitations are listed in Table 5. However, it must be realized that it is most difficult to summarize limitations while differentiating between pass/fail terminologies, calendars, and academic programs.

Table 5

LIMITATIONS ON PASS/FAIL ENROLLMENTS
SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Limitations	Cases[a] (%)	Limitations	Cases (%)
In good standing	31 (28.7)	No limitations	5 (4.6)
Electives only	27 (25.0)	3.0 grade point	3 (2.8)
Outside the major	10 (9.3)	No Gen. Requirements	3 (2.8)
Full load of graded work	9 (8.3)	Varies by class	3 (2.8)
Determined by College	7 (6.4)	Other	10 (9.3)

[a] n=108; some institutions listed more than one limitation.

Registration and Enrollment Changes

Methods of registering for the various options vary by institution. A question of extreme importance to students concerns the time limit for adding or changing the pass/fail option after registration. In this study, 32 (31.4%) of those reporting allowed students to declare the option up to the "normal deadline for adds and drops" (the deadline for enrollment changes particular to each institution). Eighteen (17.6%) indicated that the pass/fail option could be declared only at registration. Fourteen (13.7%) allowed a period of two weeks for changes involving pass/fail. Additional variations are listed in Table 6.

Table 6

PERIOD TO ADD OR CHANGE THE PASS/FAIL OPTION
SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Period	Cases (%)	Period	Cases (%)
Same as add/drops	32 (31.4)	Six (6) weeks	2 (1.9)
Registration only	18 (17.6)	Four (4) weeks	2 (1.9)
Two (2) weeks	14 (13.7)	Other	5 (4.6)
One (1) week	7 (6.9)	No information	18 (17.6)
Three (3) weeks	4 (3.9)		

Control of the Option

In most instances, consent is required for enrollment in a grading option. Of the responding institutions, 37 (36.3%) indicated that the faculty adviser approves each enrollment, 15 (14.7%) reported the student was responsible for the selection, and 16 (15.7%) listed no information relative to control or approval. Additional variations are listed in Table 7.

Table 7

CONTROL OF THE OPTION
SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Approving Agent	Cases (%)	Approving Agent	Cases (%)
Faculty Adviser	37 (36.3)	Academic Dean	5 (4.9)
Student	15 (14.7)	College	4 (3.9)
Instructor	11 (10.8)	Other[a]	9 (8.3)
Department Chairman	7 (6.9)	No information	16 (15.7)

[a]See Appendix A.

Instructor Involvement

Some institutions apparently feel that the students' final evaluation may be jeopardized if individual instructors are able to identify pass/

fail students from those enrolled under the standard grading system. In these cases, the student's pass/fail commitment is limited to the student, the approving agent, and the Registrar. Thus, class lists give no indication of those enrolled under the option. Instructors are required to report regular letter grades to the Registrar's Office where they are converted (usually by computer) to the appropriate pass/fail mark. A fringe benefit of this system is that the records office can maintain a duplicate set (usually unofficial) of letter grades for research and counseling purposes. In this study, 22 (21.6%) of the respondents indicated that the instructors were denied knowledge of pass/fail enrollments and were thus required to report a standard letter grade for conversion by the Registrar. Conversely, in 80 (78.4%) cases, the instructors were aware of those enrolled in their courses under the special grading option.

A Conceptual Model

Much of the data listed in this study may be outdated by the time it is released. However, emergent trends can be determined, and a useful model can be designed.

The pass/fail concept is nearly 120 years old, but widespread acceptance of the option is relatively recent. The option is usually available to all undergraduate students. These students are allowed to take one course per term. In a majority of cases, the student must be in good academic standing before he is allowed to utilize the option, and he is normally limited to courses outside his major field of study. The student must obtain approval prior to declaring the option at registration, and the registrant is limited to a short period in which to add, change, or drop the option. In over half of the cases, a failing grade does not affect the grade point average.

Of the 25 options adopted during 1969-70, 14 (55%) utilize a variation of credit/no credit, while 18 (72%) completely eliminate the effect of the "F" on the grade point average. Thus, while pass/fail is the more prominent trend in new grading techniques, the credit/no credit option, with complete elimination of the concept of "failure", is the emerging pattern.

Specific information by institution is listed in Appendix A.

LITERATURE CITED

[1]Daniel Starch and E. C. Elliot, "Reliability of the Grading of High School Work in English," School Review, Vol 20, 1912.

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[5]Donald P. Hoyt, "College Grades and Adult Accomplishment," Educational Record, Winter, 1966.

[6]Max S. Marshall, Teaching Without Grades, Oregon State University Press, 1968.

[7]Mary Lovett Smallwood, An Historical Study of Examinations and Grading Systems in Early American Universities, Harvard University Press, 1935.

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APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF GRADING OPTIONS - SELECTED FOUR YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES[1]

Institution	Date[2]	Available[3] To	Course/Credits Allowable[4]	Grading Options		Control Agent
				Nomenclature	"F" Counts	
Allegheny College		3,4	2 co	S-U	No	Student
Antioch College	7/68	1,2,3,4	All letter grades abolished July 1, 1968			
Austin-Peay State Univ.	9/69	3,4	18 cr	P/F	Yes	Student
Bradley Univ.	9/70	1,2,3,4	8 co	CR/NC	No	Student
Brown Univ.	9/69	1,2,3,4	All	A,B,C/NC	No	--
Calif. Institute of Technology	9/64	1	All First Year	P/F	Yes	--
Calif. Institute of Technology	9/67	2,3,4	6 co	P/F	Yes	Instructor
Central Washington State College[5]	1/69	1,2,3,4	15 cr	P/F	No	Adviser
Colorado College	--	1,2,3,4	8 co	P/F	No	Adviser
Colorado State Univ.	9/69	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/NP	No	Adviser
Columbia Univ.[6]	9/67	1,2,3,4	8 co	P/F	Yes	Student
Cornell Univ.	--	1,2,3,4	8 co	S-U	No	Adviser
DePauw Univ.	2/67	3,4	4 co	P/F	No	Registrar
Dillard Univ.	9/68	1	All First Year	H,P,F	No	--
Duke Univ.	9/67	1,2,3,4	8 co	P-U	Yes	Instructor
Eastern Oregon College	9/69	1,2,3,4	36 cr	S-U	No	--
Eastern Washington State College	1/69	1,2,3,4	60 cr	CR/NC	No	Department
Emory Univ.	--	1,2,3,4	15 cr	S-U	No	Student
Florida Presbyterian	9/68	1,2,3,4	All	HP,P,F	No	--
Gonzaga Univ.	2/68	1,2,3,4	5 co	P/F	No	Instructor
Grinnell College[5]	9/66	1,2,3,4	7 co	CR/F	Yes	--
Harvard Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	8½ co	P/F	Yes	Instructor
Idaho State Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	8 co	P/NP	No	Instructor
Indiana Univ.	9/69	1,2,3,4	8 co	P/F	Yes	Dean
Iowa State Univ.	9/68	2,3,4	6 co	P/F	No	Department
Kansas State Univ.	2/68	1,2,3,4	20 cr	CR/NC	No	Instructor
Knox College	--	3,4	nl	P/F	Yes	--
Lewis and Clark College	9/69	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/NP	No	Department
Memphis State Univ.	9/69	1,2,3,4	12 cr	CR/NC	No	--
Michigan State Univ.	9/69	1,2,3,4	30 cr	CR/NC	No	Adviser
New Mexico State Univ.	--	2,3,4	21 cr	S-U	No	Dean
North Dakota State Univ.	9/69	2,3,4	24 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
North Texas State Univ.	9/69	1,2,3,4	18 cr	P/NC	No	Department
Oberlin College	9/66	1,2,3,4	8 co	S-U	No	Student
Occidental College	9/66	3,4	6 co	P/F	Yes	--
Ohio State Univ.	9/68	2,3,4	15 cr	P/NP	No	Department
Oklahoma State Univ.	--	4	3 co	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Oregon College of Education	9/68	1,2,3,4	nl	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Oregon State Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	27 cr	S-U	No	--
Pacific Lutheran Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	4 co	P/F	No	Instructor
Pennsylvania State	9/68	1,2,3,4	18 cr	S-U	No	Adviser
Portland State Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	18 cr	P/NP	No	Department
Princeton Univ.	9/66	1,2,3,4	4 co	P/F	No	Adviser
Purdue Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	21 cr	P/NP	Yes	Adviser
Queens College (C.U.N.Y.)	--	3,4	4 co	P/F	No	Adviser
Reed College	9/66	3,4	32 cr	P/F	No	Adviser
Rice Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	4 co	P/F	Yes	Student
San Francisco State Univ.	9/68	1,2,3,4	45 cr	P/NR	No	Department
Simmons College	9/68	1,2,3,4	All	H,P,F	Yes	--
Southern Methodist Univ.	9/69	1,2,3,4	--	S-U	No	--
Stanford Univ.	9/66	1,2,3,4	27 cr	P/F	No	Instructor
Southern Oregon College	9/69	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/NP	No	Student
Swathmore College	9/68	1,2,3,4	Varies by Class	P/F	No	Instructor
Syracuse Univ.	9/67	2,3,4	6 co	P/F	Yes	Student
Univ. Of Alaska	2/68	3,4	4 co	P/F	Yes	Instructor
Univ.of Alabama	2/69	3,4	4 co	P/F	Yes	Dean
Univ. of Calif.-Berkeley	9/66	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/NP	No	Adviser
Univ. of Calif.-Irvine	9/68	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/NP	No	Student
Univ. of Calif.-Los Angeles	9/68	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/NP	No	Adviser
Univ. of Calif.-San Diego	9/68	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/NP	No	Adviser
Univ. of Calif.-Santa Cruz	9/65	1,2,3,4	All	P/F	No	--
Univ. of Connecticut	9/68	2,3,4	16 cr	P/F	No	--
Univ. of Delaware	9/69	1,2,3,4	8 co	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Hawaii	9/68	1,2,3,4	40 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Idaho	9/68	3,4	12 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Illinois-Chicago Circle	9/69	1,2,3,4	12 co	P/F	No	College
Univ. of Illinois-Urbana	9/67	1,2,3,4	18 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Iowa	9/67	1,2,3,4	32 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Kansas	9/68	1,2,3,4	8 co	CR/NC	No	Adviser
Univ. of Kentucky	1/69	2,3,4	4 co	P/F	No	Dean
Univ. of Maryland	9/67	2,3,4	6 co	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Massachusetts	2/68	1,2,3,4	8 co	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Michigan	2/68	2,3,4	4 co	P/F	Yes	--
Univ. of Minnesota	9/67	1,2,3,4	25 %	P/N	No	Student
Univ. of Missouri	9/69	2,3,4	20 %	S-U	No	Department
Univ. of Nebraska	9/66	3,4	4 co	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of New Mexico	2/70	1,2,3,4	24 cr	CR/W	No	Registrar
Univ. of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	9/67	1,2,3,4	24 cr	P/F	Yes	Student
Univ. of North Carolina-Charlotte	9/68	1,2,3,4	4 co	H,P,NC	No	Student
Univ. of Notre Dame	9/70	3,4	4 co	P/F	No	Adviser
Univ. of Oklahoma	9/68	2,3,4	16 cr	P/F	Yes	Student
Univ. of Oregon	9/67	1,2,3,4	36 cr	P/N	Yes	--
Univ. of Pennsylvania	--	2,3,4	6 co	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Portland	9/69	3,4	12 cr	P/NP	No	Adviser
Univ. of The South	9/67	3,4	1 co	P/F	No	Instructor
Univ. of South Carolina-Columbia	9/68	1,2,3,4	8 co	P/F	No	Dean
Univ. of Tennessee-Knoxville	9/68	3,4	24 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Univ. of Texas-Arlington	9/69	2,3,4	16 cr	P/F	Yes	Department
Univ. of Utah	9/67	2,3,4	9 co	P/F	Yes	Student
Univ. of Washington	9/68	2,3,4	25 cr	S-E	Yes	Department
Utah State Univ.	9/68	2,3,4	9 co	P/D,F	Yes	Adviser
Vanderbilt Univ.	9/68	3,4	12 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Wake-Forest Univ.	9/67	3,4	12 cr	P/F	No	Instructor
Washington State Univ.	6/68	1,2,3,4	18 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Western Michigan Univ.	9/68	2,3,4	12 cr	P/F	No	Adviser
Westminster College	9/65	1,2,3,4	All	DN,HP,P,NC	No	--
West Virginia Univ.	9/68	3,4	15 cr	P/F	Yes	Adviser
Western Washington State College	9/68	1,2,3,4	24 cr	P/NP	No	--
Whitman College	9/66	2,3,4	6 co	P/D,F	Yes	Student
Whitworth College	9/68	1,2,3,4	4 co	P/F	No	Adviser
Willamette Univ.[5]	9/69	1,2,3,4	7 co	P/F	Yes	Student
Yale Univ.	11/67	1,2,3,4	All	H,HP,P,F	Yes	--

[1] Includes summary of pass/fail and similar grading options. Data do not include special courses that are taught only on S-F or S-U basis.

[2] Date grading option became effective.

[3] Available to classes: 1 (freshmen), 2 (sophomore), 3 (junior), 4 (senior).

[4] Maximum credit allowable in four year period. co=course(s), cr=credit(s), nl=no limit.

[5] Option not available to first term freshmen.

[6] Columbia College only.